



**General Certificate of Education (A-level)  
January 2011**

**Communication and Culture**

**COMM3**

**(Specification 2625)**

**Unit 3: Communicating Culture**

***Report on the Examination***

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## General

This was the first occasion on which a COMM3 examination could be taken in January and it was no surprise to discover that the entry was relatively small. More surprising, though, was the fact that a clear majority were not re-sitting the exam but taking it for the first time. Given the range of material addressed by COMM4, candidates demonstrated an impressive ability to respond fully and appropriately to the demands of the paper.

The format of and register of the paper posed no obvious problems and there were only a few instances of misinterpretation of or failure to grasp the implications of the set task. As with the first COMM3 exam in June 2010, most candidates knew what to expect and made effective use of the time available. There was a strong impression that candidates had found the paper enabling insofar as they were able to give unimpeded expression to their knowledge and skills. There was a good distribution of marks across the entire range and quite a few candidates managed the impressive feat of attaining full marks (40 out of 40) for their answers.

The demands of this paper were very similar to those of the June 2010 paper, yet the mean mark was almost three fewer than the June mean. With only 200 or so candidates, it would be unwise to place too much significance on this statistic, but still worth bearing in mind when making decisions about course planning and the timing of exam entries.

## SECTION A

### Question 1

The purpose of the Section A task is to test candidates' ability to interpret and evaluate competing arguments within a conceptual framework derived from their study of theoretical approaches, key terms and case studies. It is not expected that candidates will demonstrate a fully-informed subject knowledge of the topic under consideration, though the topics themselves will always be within the broad ambit of Communication and Culture. (See the Report on the June 2010 exam for further guidance on the nature of Question 1)

On this occasion the topic was surveillance and the pros and cons of 'surveillance society'. Gratifyingly, the majority of answers were able to grasp the significance of the arguments and most were able to link them to theoretical approaches. Some candidates used a template based on all the theories and concepts with which they were familiar, offering a sentence or two on each for Argument A before going through the same routine for Argument B. Whilst acknowledging that a systematic approach such as this can have its advantages, it is not one that suits all candidates. Such answers frequently sacrifice depth to breadth, making somewhat simplistic assertions about different aspects of the arguments.

Better answers tended to prioritise some concepts over others, showing that well prepared and able candidates have the confidence to use their knowledge and skills selectively. Most candidates struck a healthy balance between theoretical discussion and practical examples, with plenty of such examples drawn from personal experience of surveillance, both positive and negative. The level of sophistication varied, of course, but it was good to see so many answers that located relevant illustrations within some sort of theoretical framework. This ability to contextualise the practices of everyday life is right at the heart of the Communication and Culture specification.

## **SECTION B**

### **Question 2**

The idea of 'intersection' is a clear invitation to explore areas of overlap and relations between any two of the cultural sites. A number of accomplished answers did precisely this, for example by looking at how buildings (Spaces and Places) may have stories woven around them (Fictions) or by exploring the nature of books and DVDs (Fictions) as collectible items (Objects of Desire).

Weaker answers did not, generally speaking, follow this pattern. Rather than discussing the intersection between two sites of culture, they dealt with the sites sequentially. It was difficult to reward even the best of such responses beyond the lower reaches of Level Three.

A few answers misinterpreted the term 'cultural sites' and selected two theoretical approaches or key concepts instead; a good illustration of that old maxim that you must read the question and the rubric carefully.

### **Question 3**

This generic question was the least popular in June 2010 but the most popular Section B question in January 2011. Perhaps candidates were drawn to the key concept 'technology' but in any event the lowest mean mark of the whole paper was achieved by answers to Q3.

The reason for this relatively poor performance is easily identified: a limited understanding of 'the role of technology'. Many answers used technology as a simple category, for example by asserting that film is 'a technology' and following up with a discussion of film as fiction. In a similar vein, mobile phones were identified as 'a technology' as well as an object of desire.

Approaches such as this did not really do justice to technology as a key concept.

Better answers demonstrated at least some familiarity with technological determinism, or the creative potential of technology, or debates about control and direction of development of new technology or issues from differential access to technology.

### **Question 4**

Invariably, good Spaces and Places answers are based on solid case study work. This was certainly evident here with plentiful evidence of the detailed analysis of, amongst other examples, shopping malls, high streets, heritage zones, schools and colleges. Inventively, a number of candidates drew on their AS work on identity to suggest that places, just as people, can be understood in terms of the Johari Window, transactional analysis or Goffman's dramaturgical model. This was certainly interesting and creative, but needed to be supplemented by A2 theoretical approaches and key concepts in order to scale the upper reaches of the mark scheme. Overall, the emphasis on identity throughout the specification has clearly had a positive effect; candidates deal confidently and cogently with this topic in a variety of contexts.

It was good to see so many answers to Question 4 favouring local and familiar examples over those drawn from secondary sources and dealing with such places as Las Vegas or Sydney. The latter are perfectly acceptable, but are best as a supplement rather than a replacement for the direct observations and experience of the candidate.

### **Question 5**

Clearly, there is some really excellent work being done by teachers in this area of the specification. Many answers were able to draw on contrasting instances of Fictions that had obviously been studied in great depth and detail. Fairy tales, gothic literature and horror films continue to be popular but it was also encouraging to note that several centres had clearly

devolved to individual students the responsibility for choosing their own selection of fictional texts for close analysis.

The main factor discriminating between answers at different levels was not the suitability of examples of fiction, but the degree to which the key concept narrative was successfully assimilated. Simple definitions of narrative such as ‘the way of telling a story’ may be helpful at an early stage, but candidates specialising in Fictions as a cultural site really need to demonstrate a more sophisticated engagement with narrative theories.

## **Question 6**

Objects of Desire is proving a popular choice for close study. Candidates clearly enjoy writing about this topic and are readily able to relate to the many conceptual approaches. The majority of answers were able to identify the suppositions underlying the statement in the question. Having associated the views expressed in the statement with market liberalism or (occasionally) optimistic postmodernism, most discussions turned to the critical theory of the Frankfurt School (or similar) for a contrasting point of view.

There were a few examples of purely theoretical responses but, to their credit, most candidates were able to ground their discussions in everyday life. As with all COMM3 answers, there is no reason to discourage candidates from working towards their own conclusions as long as their arguments and ideas are well supported by evidence and a coherent case is made. However, candidates need not feel compelled to assert their own opinion; it is perfectly acceptable to conduct a well-informed discussion in which various competing views are given a good airing. This is certainly better than the unsupported assertion that ‘I agree (or disagree) with this statement’.

## **Mark Ranges and Award of Grades**

Grade boundaries and cumulative percentage grades are available on the [Results statistics](#) page of the AQA Website.